

Factsheet: Negotiating for flu vaccinations in the Water Industry

Introduction

A motion was passed at the 2014 UNISON Water, Environment and Transport Service Group Conference on flu vaccinations. The motion called for the production and circulation of guidance to branches “to raise awareness of this issue and engage with employers to put an action plan in place where they are not already doing so.” This factsheet is a response to that motion.

The Flu virus occurs every year, usually in the winter, which is why it’s sometimes called “seasonal flu”. It is highly infectious disease with symptoms that come on very quickly. The most common symptoms of flu are fever, chills, headache, aches and pains in the joints and muscles, and extreme tiredness. In most cases, the symptoms are quite mild, but in others they can be more serious.

The flu jab is officially recommended by the NHS for ‘at risk’ groups at greater risk of developing complications from flu (e.g. pregnant women; people with chronic asthma, diabetes, chronic heart disease; the over 65’s; frontline health or social care workers). However, many employers also offer free flu vaccinations for employees outside these groups out of a desire to reduce absence through sickness and out of commitment to the wellbeing of the workforce.

What is offered in the Water Industry?

The table below shows flu vaccination provision by Water Companies across the UK :

Employer	Provision of Flu Vaccinations
South West Water	No provision
Thames Water	Employers can request a voucher and then have it done at their convenience with their own doctors.
Anglian Water	No provision
Southern Water	Offer free flu jabs (in the form of vouchers to get it done at Boots)
Yorkshire Water	Although it is not widely advertised, anyone visiting their doctor gets a receipt and gives it to their manager to have the cost refunded
South East Water	No provision
Portsmouth Water	No provision
Severn Trent	No provision
Northumbrian Water	No facility unless it is sorted from Occupational Health where it would be on individual basis
United Utilities	The cost of a flu vaccination, provided from a GP, can be claimed back under the ‘consultation’ benefit in the Employee Health Scheme.
Scottish Water	Yes, vaccination can be booked directly through Scottish Water.
Bristol Water	No provision, under normal circumstances

Arguments for offering flu vaccinations

Labour market analysts Income Data Services state that “While an employer’s health and safety obligations would not extend to offering employees vaccinations against the virus, it may be a sensible option as part of a contingency plan to avoid excessive employee absence if costs permit.”

Encouraging an employer to make this investment will not be easy, but the following arguments may help:

Minor illnesses (such as flu) accounted for 27.4 million lost working days in the UK economy in 2013. This is 30% of all sickness absences in the same year, which is by far the most common reason given. A survey carried out by the Co-operative Group¹ in 2010 found that a total of 7.6 million working days are lost each year in the UK specifically because of flu, costing the British economy £1.35bn. Their survey of more than 3,000 people showed that flu accounted for the most number of days lost among short-term illnesses. The table below summarises the results and extrapolates the figures across the UK economy.

	Sample size	UK full time work force	Self employed
Individuals	3,173	21,230,000	3,956,000
Flu Days	1,141	7,634,235	1,42,2564
Total absence days	12,937	86,559,252	16,129,458

These figures are not lost on employers who follow best practice to minimise sickness absence. According to the CBI 24% of all employers carry out some form of immunisation of their workforce such as flu vaccination. 27% employers in the private sector have taken this step².

It is usual for an individual with flu to take up to 5 days absence from work and it is estimated that sickness absence caused by flu cost an employer £522 per employee.

Further evidence from academic studies of this issue show how this can reduce costs:

“A review of 55 case studies found that there were immediate and financial benefits from wellbeing interventions found in a number of cases across all sectors and business sizes (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2008). One example of this was an NHS organisation, where a voluntary flu immunisation programme for staff led to two fewer working days absence among those who were immunised. In monetary terms, over two years the benefit of this programme was 9.2 times the cost: good health was found to be good business for employers.”³

Vaccination really can work. A workforce can reduce lost work days by up to 45% during an outbreak of flu.⁴

¹ Co-operative Group: “7.6 million working days lost due to flu

<http://www.co-operative.coop/corporate/press/press-releases/pharmacy/76-million-working-days-lost-due-to-flu/#1>

² Healthy returns? Absence and workplace health survey 2011 http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/955604/2011.05-healthy_returns_-_absence_and_workplace_health_survey_2011.pdf

³ ‘The business case for wellbeing and engagement: Literature review’ by Antonio Pangallo and Emma Donaldson-Feilder, 2009

⁴ www.fluology.com/pdf/usersguide.pdf ‘Seasonal Influenza Risk Management Guide for Employers’

In addition, offering vaccination can improve employee engagement, with workers whom they will see taking an interest in their wellbeing. Many companies run wellbeing programmes which attempt to address the broader issues which influence the health and wellbeing of staff. Branches campaigning for free flu jabs could do so by linking their request to existing health-related provision.

Also, talking to Employee Occupational Health can be another route to promoting this issue. Getting them to the importance of this issue to staff can be an important first step to having a flu vaccination scheme introduced.

How can flu vaccinations be arranged by my employer?

As you will see from the examples given above, some employers simply allow staff to make their own arrangements for vaccination and then reimburse them.

There is also a wide range of organisations who can offer either on-site vaccinations or employees can collect vouchers from their employer and visit a local pharmacy. Most major high street pharmacy chains offer this service.

A good example of a successful scheme is the one supported by Camden UNISON. You can find more information about this here:

<http://camdenunison.org.uk/2012/10/11/camdens-flu-vaccination-boots-voucher/>

Further information

NHS Choices: The Flu Jab <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/flu-influenza-vaccine.aspx>

NHS Choices: The Flu Jab, side effects <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/flu-vaccine-side-effects.aspx>

Flu Vaccination Winter 2014/15, NHS Guide:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/368079/PHE_8879_Flu_2014_A5_General_leaflet_14_.pdf